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Reaction of a Black Bittern to Attempted Predation by a Brown Goshawk

by

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Displays in the Black Bittern *Ixobrychus (Dupetor) flavicollis* are almost completely unknown and recorded encounters with the species seldom indicate such behaviour, e. g. D'Ombraïn (1955). Recent morphological studies by Payne and Risley (1976) support the placement of the Black Bittern in the genus *Ixobrychus* by Bock (1956) and Curry-Lindahl (1971). The following note describes a behavioural character for the species that may add further support to this treatment.

Along the Hann River, Cape York Peninsula, Australia, on 11 October 1974, I flushed an adult male Black Bittern several times from near the river bank and once from 10 m up in the foliage of a paperbark tree (*Melaleuca* sp.). About 400 m further along I came upon it about 30 m in front of me, standing on a fallen tree that bridged the river about one metre above its surface. The bittern remained quite still for nearly 15 minutes, in a squatting, semi-erect posture with its bill held up at an angle of about 40°. An immature Brown Goshawk (*Accipiter fasciatus*) suddenly flew into view and immediately stooped towards the bittern. The bittern moved only when the goshawk was a few metres away; whereupon it partially extended both wings outward about 20 cm in a narrow arc, ducked down, jumped off the log and furtively slipped into the water below, holding its head and neck above the water's surface, with its outstretched wings acting to support it. The goshawk alighted on the log and stood, with wings held outward and bill open, facing the bittern. With ungainly movements the bittern climbed onto a branch of the fallen tree resting on the water's surface and turned to face the goshawk while simultaneously erecting its head and body feathers. The wings were fully extended and raised upward until the dorsal surfaces were almost aligned with the raised back feathers. The neck was arched slightly downward and the bill was raised to an angle of about 60° facing the goshawk, which was now about two metres away and one metre higher than the bittern. Then the bittern opened its